

God gives us miraculous gifts to build up the body of Christ
A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey
at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, January 17, 2016
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany (year C), 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

1 Corinthians 12:1-11(NRSV) *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

The New Testament Lessons this January are all about how God the Holy Spirit empowers us to be the church—the Christian Community. Last week, we heard about the apostles and baptizing with the Holy Spirit. This week we hear from Paul about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Next week, we will hear more from Paul about how these gifts work together to build up the body of Christ, and the week after, we will hear about the more excellent way—the way of love more important than any gift.

Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. Paul helped to start the church in Corinth, and he's addressing some troubles they have. They discovered miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit that God gives us. But the Corinthians have formed factions around their different gifts—silos that compete with each other. I once described the problem like a pot luck supper where no one shares the food they've brought. Everyone comes with the gifts God gave them, but no one shares their gift, and thinks only of themselves. So the community is divided and starved of the grace God wants for them.

Paul's general theme in 1 Corinthians, then, is our unity in Christ. God the Holy Spirit empowers us to be the church together. He doesn't want the 'Paul faction' to win over the 'Peter faction,' and he doesn't want one set of gifts and talents to dominate the others. Paul doesn't want mere institutional unity either, one that is polite at the expense of faithfulness to our Lord—he wants unity *in Christ*. He wants us—God wants us—to use our gifts together to build up the whole body of Christ.

God builds up the church through the Holy Spirit. To be clear, the Holy Spirit is not a generic feel-good source of sentimental inspiration or a metaphor for collective excitement. The Holy Spirit is not the zeitgeist of what is fashionable in church. The Holy Spirit is the third person of God the Holy Trinity—the power of Jesus Christ at work in us and through us. God the Holy Spirit empowers us to be the Christian Community.

Let's consider these gifts of the Holy Spirit that Paul describes in today's readings. God has given us many gifts, some that are natural and formed by practice and discipline. These are the

gifts that we develop as we grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Some of God's gifts are miraculous, even supernatural, and given just at the moment God wants them to be used. Some of the gifts Paul mentions sound normal and some sound strange. But they all have a place in the Christian Community. The Holy Spirit uses these gifts to unify and empower us for ministry.

Paul writes about gifts of knowledge and wisdom and faith. I heard a story once of a man who parked his car in a parking lot he regularly used, then had a strange thought—'I think I'll park in a different spot today,' so he got back in his car, pulled out of the spot and circled around the lot again. When he did, he found the body of someone who had collapsed in the snow. He drove the person to the hospital, and the medical staff later told him that if he had arrived two minutes later, the man would have died. That is a gift of faith—of following where God leads, not always knowing why—being open to serve God for his hidden purpose. Or perhaps, this was a gift of healing, in a complicated way.

Another person I know once heard several people independently and out of the blue tell him he should visit his sick brother. This was clearly a call of God—a gift of knowledge or prophecy, perhaps. And it led to an opportunity for reconciliation before the brother died. The gift of Prophecy is usually *not* about telling the future. Prophecy is more about speaking a message from God that needs to be heard—like that message about the sick brother.

There are other gifts too. When Paul lists knowledge & wisdom among the gifts, he is not describing book learning or natural wisdom. Paul is describing knowledge & wisdom that drops upon us from the Holy Spirit at the moment and for the purpose that God intends. Many people have experienced miraculous healing, and many of us have had those strange miracles in our lives that bring us closer to God and closer to each other.

The gift of tongues at Pentecost enabled the disciples to speak in the foreign languages of people visiting Jerusalem from foreign countries. More commonly, we hear about the gift of tongues as a sort of babbling language of prayer. In this gift, the Holy Spirit prays for us when we don't know what to say or how to express our agony or our joy, our confusion or our delight. This gift gets a lot of press in Charismatic or Pentecostal churches. Sometimes too much is made of the gift of tongues. On the other hand, sometimes the gift is put down with derision. Paul both affirms this gift, and asks that we not make it the most important gift. The same Holy Spirit of God gives all of these gifts to us to build up the whole body of Christ.

God calls us to be open to these gifts, both in ourselves and in others, even others who are different from us, or going to different Christian churches. I am saddened when I hear hostility toward our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ. Or Baptists, or Pentecostals, or other Episcopalians in other parishes! Sometimes we divide ourselves like the Corinthians over pride in our own gifts and derision of the gifts of others. Sometimes we are short sighted and don't even recognize the gifts God has given us.

Sometimes we hold back from using our gifts—natural or supernatural. We hold back because we're intimidated or feel unprepared or inexperienced. And yet, each person can take a place in the ministry of the church, and what seem like small gifts can make a huge difference. And taking that step to get involved is a way to open yourself up to God developing new gifts in you.

You may say “well, I can’t preach like the clergy,” or “I can’t play the organ like George.” The truth is that there are many lay people who are far more gifted than our clergy. And in fact, only a couple of people at St. Peter & St. Paul can play the organ—but what a blessing to us they are! Your gift may not be their gift. But they rely on the gifts of others in their ministry of music. The chief role of the musicians is to support the whole congregation in praising God in music. That means you all should sing the hymns with energy and enthusiasm! Even the communion hymns—they are there for you to sing! Your gift makes a difference to the whole community when you do your part.

The Choir is a great example. In the choir, the basses do their part; the sopranos and altos and tenors do their part—and not as individuals standing out over the others. Rather, each singer listens to the other singers in order to get the blend and the pitch just right—each singer’s gift builds up the whole choir. And all of the singers watch the director. Without the unifying work of the director, our gifts would amount to a lot of noise, but if we stay focused on our director, we make beautiful music!

So it is in the church! So it is in the Christian Community! We can embrace the gifts God has given to us, use them in concert with others and keep our eyes on the direction of Jesus Christ. We can operate not on our own power, but on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. When we do, we will discover the blessings of God far greater than we could know on our own. The Holy Spirit empowers us with miraculous gifts to build up the body of Christ.

You may be thinking—I don’t know what this guy is talking about! I’ve never heard of these strange gifts, much less experienced them in my life! I would encourage you first to be open to God’s gifts. God has given you far more than you realize. Be open to God’s gifts—even seek the gifts of the Holy Spirit, both the natural talents that God is developing in you, and the exceptional and unusual gifts that God might give you just when God wants you.

I also encourage you to recognize the gifts in others. God gives these gifts to the people around you, and they may not be the same gifts given to you. Whether they come from other Christian churches or sit in the next pew, be open to how God might be using them for his purposes. God might even use their gifts to bless you! Recognize the gifts in others, and rejoice in what God accomplishes in them.

When we focus not on ourselves, but on what God is doing in us as a whole community, we open ourselves to the amazing things that God can do in us. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can live into the vision that God has for us as a Christian Community. And God, working in us, will do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.